

THE SKOURAS

20TH-CENTURY TITANS

BROTHERS

COMMENTATORS HAVE LONG OFFERED OPINIONS ON THEIR IDEA OF THE AMERICAN DREAM. THE TERM, COINED BY HISTORIAN JAMES TRUSLOW ADAMS IN HIS 1931 BOOK *The Epic of America*, WAS MEANT TO CONVEY “A DREAM OF BEING ABLE TO GROW TO FULLEST DEVELOPMENT AS MAN AND WOMAN, UNHAMPERED BY THE BARRIERS WHICH HAD SLOWLY BEEN ERECTED IN THE OLDER CIVILIZATIONS, UNREPPRESSED BY SOCIAL ORDERS WHICH HAD DEVELOPED FOR THE BENEFIT OF CLASSES RATHER THAN FOR THE SIMPLE HUMAN BEING OF ANY AND EVERY CLASS.” WHILE ONE MAY CONTEND SUCH A VISION IS ASPIRATIONAL AT BEST, DURING THE 1910S AND 1920S, THREE YOUNG, STRUGGLING GREEK IMMIGRANT BROTHERS WHO BEGAN THEIR AMERICAN JOURNEY IN ST. LOUIS ACHIEVED JUST THAT. CHARLES, SPYROS, AND GEORGE SKOURAS REACHED A PINNACLE OF SUCCESS AND NOTORIETY ACHIEVED BY FEW, AND IT WOULD NOT HAVE HAPPENED WITHOUT THE TRIALS AND OPPORTUNITIES THEY EXPERIENCED DURING THE TWO DECADES THEY LIVED IN ST. LOUIS.

By Michael G. Tsichlis, PhD

The source of the Skouras brothers' dreams and motivations began far away, in a small village in the rural province of Elis on the western side of the Peloponnese peninsula in southern Greece, just 25 miles from the ancient site of Olympia. At the outbreak of the Greek War of Independence in 1821, the Skourases' great-grandfather, Demetrios Skouras, led fellow Greeks alongside the British army in a bloody skirmish against

the Ottoman Turks, who had ruled Greece for four centuries. After the war ended in 1829, the Greek government granted Demetrios a large tract of land in a valley where he founded Skourohorion, meaning *Skouras's village* or *Skourasville*. The surname *Skouras* derived from the Greek word *skora*, meaning *the dark ones*.

Demetrios Skouras's grandson, Panagiotis Skouras, inherited his family's land, which was filled with vineyards, olive groves, cattle, and sheep. He and his wife,

{ Spyros, Charles, and George Skouras, ca. 1911.
Photograph courtesy of the Spyros P. Skouras Archives,
Stanford University.

Spyroula, had nine children who survived to adulthood. The five girls and four boys all contributed to daily life on the farm. The children were twenty-five years apart in age. Constantinos Skouras, who later anglicized his first name to Charles, was the eighth child, born on January 25, 1889. Another son, Spyros, followed on March 28, 1893. Demetrios and Spyroula's final child, George, arrived in 1896.

Spyros tended fields and herded sheep as a boy, enjoying the quiet solitude that allowed him "to think and plan [his] future." However, in the spring of 1907 tragedy upended the family's business. A nearby river flooded and engulfed their farm in water and sand, destroying the crops. The catastrophe was worsened by a worm infestation that decimated the olive groves. The income and sustenance derived from the farm plummeted. For the first time, Spyros recalled, his family was confronted by a profound financial crisis and the threat of starvation. "From that time on," he said, "I felt the pinch of poverty with a vengeance, and can still remember my mother crying because she did not have enough food to give her children."

In order to survive the family decided it was best for the boys to travel to America to find work, as many Greek men were doing at that time. The eldest son, Demetrios, stayed behind to help care for the family. Pulling together what they could to pay his travel, the next eldest male, Charles, left his ancestral village for America at the age of nineteen. Charles arrived in New York on June 25, 1908. He remained there for several months, reportedly working as a dishwasher in a restaurant earning 50 cents per day, plus meals. He saved enough money to take a train west to St. Louis, a city that had become known as a place of opportunity for Greek immigrants. As far back as the 1860s, a trickle of Hellenes began arriving in the city and setting down roots. As the St. Louis World's Fair approached, the need for Fair workers attracted many young, job-seeking Greek men. In February 1909 the *St. Louis Republic* reported with a bold headline that a "Greek Invasion" was underway. Between 1900 and 1910 the city's Greek-born population grew from fewer than one hundred to more than twenty-eight hundred.

Knowing his countrymen were avid newspaper readers, Charles Skouras set up a route delivering Greek- and English-language papers to about two hundred locations.

These drop-off encounters enabled him to expand his community contacts, and soon he found work busing tables at the opulent Jefferson Hotel on Twelfth and Locust streets. He was quickly promoted to waiter, earning about \$1 a day, plus tips. During his first year in St. Louis he lived in the back room of a Greek-owned store.

Half a world away, sixteen-year-old Spyros Skouras was preparing to follow his brother to America. After Charles's departure, Spyros moved to the nearby Greek coastal city of Patras, where he studied commerce, accounting, and English while working as an office boy for a local insurance and navigation company. He also saw his first movie at this time, later recalling how impressed he was by this "newest development of ancient drama."

In the spring of 1910 Spyros received a money order from Charles for steamship passage to America. He spent three weeks at sea, traveling with other steerage immigrants. While almost everyone aboard was identified in the manifest as a "workman," Spyros's stated occupation was a "scholar" who "knows a little English language." After passing his physical at Ellis Island and celebrating the thrill of arrival with his shipmates, Spyros boarded a 5:00 a.m. train for a two-day journey to St. Louis. Not finding his brother at the train station, he went straight to the Jefferson Hotel, which he recognized from the hotel stationery Charles used to write letters home. Awed by its grandeur, he ambled around the building several times before inquiring of his brother's whereabouts to a doorman dressed "like an officer in the Czar's Army." At that moment Charles appeared, and after over two years apart the brothers warmly embraced. From there Charles took him home, where Spyros "took a long-needed bath."

Charles quickly set up his brother for employment, purchasing American-style business clothes and landing him a job first busing tables and then as a bartender at the Planter's House Hotel. From this moment on, the brothers' bond was unbreakable. One family account later compared it to the ancient Greek tale of Damon and Pythias, two friends who would give up their very lives for each other.

Charles met Florence Souders, the fifteen-year-old daughter and only child of a widowed mother, Ida, who managed two boarding houses and lived in one of them. Charles and another Greek youth lived in the other. Struggling with his English skills, Charles asked if she

knew someone who could help, and Ida suggested he meet her daughter. Florence recalled Charles as “a good-looking kid” and said he soon began expressing affection by bringing her a gold bracelet and other gifts. The couple married on May 17, 1910, in Macoupin County, Illinois. Their first child, Edith, was born two years later.

Within a year of Spyros’s arrival, sixteen-year-old George Skouras journeyed to join his older brothers. The three took up cramped quarters in a tenement building at the corner of Locust and Fifteenth streets on the west end of downtown. Once a fashionable private neighborhood known as Lucas Place, it was now a rundown area. The group lived with Florence and her mother, who handled housekeeping and chores while the brothers worked long hours at the hotels. They pooled their resources, and at the end of the day they counted their earnings. George joined Charles as a waiter at the Jefferson Hotel, a short walk from their quarters. Rather than spend 10 cents in trolley fare, Spyros walked over a mile each way to his job at the Planter’s House. With his workday beginning at 3:45 a.m. and ending at 4:00 p.m., he later recalled the slog of “[trudging] through winter snows and at other times in the sweltering heat of a St. Louis summer.” By the end of 1912 the brothers and their now extended family moved into larger quarters in a home at 3126 Washington Avenue in midtown St. Louis, another mile and a half from their work.

For three years the brothers worked, saved, and dreamed about where the future would take them. Gregarious and ambitious, Spyros so often spoke about his aspirations with fellow hotel workers that they threw dirty dish rags at him to get him to stop. Spyros only replied, “All right, you’ll see, you guys will be around asking me for jobs one day.” Bar patrons were so impressed with the young man’s tenacity that after hearing about the long hours he worked while also attending night school at Jones Business College, many left him 15-cent tips rather than the customary 10 cents. The brothers were determined to succeed as a team. The looming question was: By what path?

A NEW MEDIUM CREATES NEW OPPORTUNITIES

The motion picture exhibition industry in America was born in the first decade of the twentieth century. Thomas

Edison’s early moving picture projector devices had brought recorded movement storytelling to the masses. Actors working in vaudeville took part in productions filmed as short one- or two-act stories, often appearing back-to-back on the same celluloid reel. Films such as 1903’s *The Great Train Robbery* proved the medium had broad appeal. Moving-picture theaters began popping up across the country in 1905.

On October 17, 1906, the first continually operating, stand-alone movie theater opened in St. Louis at 1413 Market Street, in a retrofitted former tailor’s shop. Called the World’s Dream Theatre, it provided 120 folding chairs for patrons and standing room for 200 more. The owner of this novel venture was John Karzin, a twenty-four-year-old Greek immigrant. Along with Harry “Doc” Miller, Karzin opened the theater for \$1,000. Most early movie houses were known as *nickelodeons*, a word derived from their 5-cent admission cost and *odeon*, the ancient Greek word for theater. The World’s Dream kicked off a long and prosperous career for Karzin.

In 1910 Karzin briefly left St. Louis to open a movie house in Springfield, Illinois, and sold the World’s Dream to another Greek immigrant, eighteen-year-old Thomas James. James continued its operation until 1914, when he sold it to his business partner and fellow Hellene George Dubis and theater manager John Francis. The theater was remodeled in 1914 with two hundred fixed seats and renamed the Amuse U, only to be sold in 1916 to two other Greeks who opened a pool hall at the site, ending St. Louis’s first dedicated foray into moving-picture exhibition. By now motion pictures were a permanent American cultural fixture, and in 1915 the trade publication *The Moving Picture World* reported that St. Louis was “one of [the country’s] best picture towns.” The city had gone from one movie house in 1906 to more than one hundred just eight years later.

Even would-be exhibitors of modest means could rent a small storefront venue, obtain a movie projector, set out chairs, lease films, and charge admission. The key to strong ticket sales was to make the venue as inviting as possible and ensure that quality “first-run” films were always available. Short films were evolving into lengthier ones with complex plots, multiple sets, and actors who became national celebrities. Film studios like Pathe, Mutual, Rialto, Paramount, and Universal competed for movie-house screen time. Theater owners brought

sound to the silent medium, such as live piano or organ accompaniment during screenings. Larger theaters added vaudeville acts to an evening's entertainment.

Meanwhile, the Skourases pondered their own business niche. They discussed opening a saloon or a business improving shipment packaging for Greek food imports. The brothers' rare free time came on Sundays, when they attended church in the morning and watched vaudeville acts in the afternoon and evening. They were especially attracted to movies because of their low cost and high appeal, and they began reading trade publications to learn more about the industry. They quickly realized that movie exhibition was a business where, as Spyros recalled, "newcomers [could] get in on the ground floor and still rise to the top within their lifetime."

In 1913, Spyros and another Greek immigrant, thirty-seven-year-old George Tompras, began discussing the prospect of opening a movie theater. Tompras knew



George Tompras, a Greek immigrant entrepreneur, was the Skourases' first partner in the movie theater business. Photograph courtesy of Michael G. Tsihchlis.

two other Greeks who were ready to enter the exhibition business but needed additional capital: carpenter George Gallanis and restaurant owner Gus Gallanis. After conferring with his brothers on Tompras's business proposition, the Skourases agreed to invest \$3,000 of a total of \$12,000 in initial capital stock in the new venture. Tompras contributed another \$3,000 and Gus Gallanis \$6,000. On July 7, 1914, the partners incorporated the Olympia Amusement Company.

The company acquired adjacent storefronts at 1420 and 1422 Market Street, combining and renovating the spaces to create their first theater enterprise, an eleven-hundred-seat venue replete with an illuminated marquee topped with a life-size statue of a goddess-like woman supporting a lantern globe on each of her outstretched arms. They named the theater the Olympia and opened it in October 1914. It was across the street from the World's Dream, and its much higher seating capacity likely forced the smaller theater to close within a year.

George Tompras and Gus Gallanis wanted Spyros to manage the Olympia, but Spyros pushed for his brother Charles instead, insisting he was "a shrewd, hard-working man, as well as my older brother, and that I had a lot of respect for him, and that it had to be him." It turned out to be a smart move. While the theater began showing no-name, ten-minute shorts, Charles's genial negotiating skills enabled the Olympia to lease first-run feature films, like popular comedies starring Charlie Chaplin and Mack Sennett's Keystone Kops. Charles did not take a salary his first year. As they often did, the Skourases were willing to sacrifice in the short term for something bigger in the long run, gaining experience and connections along the way.

The Olympia featured a four-piece orchestra accompaniment that included Charles's wife, Florence, on piano. The following year he was able to purchase a \$7,000 Wurlitzer orchestra organ. Movie exhibitions ran continuously from 10:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m., and Charles charged 5 cents admission when most movie houses were charging 10 cents. One trade publication described the theater as equipped with "the latest ideas in ventilation and air cooling" and whose projecting room "is a model of neatness."

Patrons of the Olympia were of "all kinds and classes," Spyros recalled. Audiences were usually about half African American and half Caucasian, many of whom were immigrants. The brothers did not turn away



When the Skourases opened the Olympia Theater in 1914, an eight-year-old girl named Freda Josephine McDonald—later known as Josephine Baker—was living in a Mill Creek Valley tenement just a block away. Photograph by William G. Swecosky, 1924.

patrons or impose segregated seating. At times the theater could become raucous, but after the Skourases began employing “girls of nice background[s]” as ushers who were trained to speak and act politely toward patrons, calm was restored. *Skouras service* became a term the brothers marketed heavily to the public.

Within a year the brothers bought out George Gallanis, who repeatedly butted heads with Charles over management. They reorganized as the Athenian Amusement Company, still in partnership with George Tompras and now his nephew Chris Tompras. They then made their second property acquisition, the Lafayette Theater on South Jefferson and Lafayette avenues on St. Louis’s south side. Spyros cut operating costs by dropping vaudeville acts for full-time movie exhibition. A December 1915 article in *The Moving Picture World* praised Skouras for consistently packing the house—even during the Christmas season, when movie business was down across the city.

Spyros took the lead for acquiring new venues, and within several months he obtained a lease to operate the Russell Airdome, just four blocks from the Lafayette. A precursor to drive-in theaters, airdomes (also called skydomes) provided outdoor movie and vaudeville entertainment during warmer months. They had an entry gate and sidewalls but no roof, and chairs were placed on a

field of grass facing a large screen or stage. The Russell was one of the city’s first airdomes. Skouras again ditched vaudeville in favor of movie-only exhibition, and to create an upscale look, he placed three Grecian king statues at the entrance, set out bright lighting, and planted 120 symmetrically arranged trees. With seating that could hold two thousand people, the Russell was now the brothers’ largest venue.

After two years of some success, new opportunities emerged. While tending bar and waiting tables, Spyros and Charles were able to cultivate relationships with members of the city’s business and civic elite, such as Leo Rassieur Jr., an attorney and judge with offices a block from the Planter’s House. Politically connected and civic-minded, Rassieur led a legal fight in 1917 to stop the enactment of a residential segregation ordinance passed by St. Louis voters. He took great interest in the brothers’ plans, reviewing and notarizing their company documents and providing legal and business advice. In



Judge Leo Rassieur Jr., a St. Louis civic leader, partnered with the Skourases in the expansion of their theater chain. Photograph by J. C. Strauss Studio, ca. 1930s. Missouri Historical Society Collections.

his memoirs, Spyros directly linked the brothers' success to their "good friend and advisor" Leo Rassieur, "a man of high character."

In January 1917, Rassieur, the Skourases, and Gus Gallanis formed the Marathon Amusement Company. With Rassieur as an investor, the brothers were able to realize Spyros's dream of acquiring the Pageant Theater. It opened to great fanfare in the West End neighborhood in September 1915. Its name came from *The Pageant and Masque of St. Louis*, the civic theatrical event with a cast of thousands held a year earlier to celebrate St. Louis's sesquicentennial. Spyros personally took over management of the Pageant and soon opened an airdome a block west he named the Crystal.

As the brothers' operations grew, Spyros made a surprising announcement in June 1918: Pulled by patriotism and a desire to learn new skills, he enlisted in the

US Army to fight in the Great War. During his absence, George, now twenty-one, took on a larger role in the business. George had been "sowing his wild oats," Spyros later recalled, spending his spare time dancing at clubs and attending baseball games. In her memoir, Florence Skouras recalled how George brought home popular songs on sheet music, and she would entertain him by playing the tunes on the piano. She also felt sorry for him, noting how his brothers "used to treat him like a child."

Leaving Charles to manage the Pageant and George the Olympia, Spyros joined the Army Air Service, where he learned to fly. Although he never saw combat, he valued the experience and came away feeling transformed, noting how "before the service, I had always been an immigrant; afterwards, that immigrant feeling evaporated and I just felt American." But the theater business



The Lyric Skydome Theater, located at the northwest corner of Taylor Avenue and Delmar Boulevard, had been called one of the most handsome *al fresco* theaters in the country. Photograph by W. C. Persons, ca. 1925. Missouri Historical Society Collections.

was changing, and during his service Charles frequently reminded his brother that he was needed back home.

Feeling more confident after his return, Spyros wasted no time expanding operations. The profitable Pageant Theater was enlarged to accommodate two thousand patrons. He also set his sights on the purchase of the West End Lyric, an upscale theater at Delmar Boulevard and Euclid Avenue described by *The Moving Picture World* as “one of the most pretentious houses in town.” The death of owner John Cornelius prompted his widow, Rose, to sell the theater. During an afternoon of talks over bourbon with Spyros, Charles, and Leo Rassieur, Rose sold all her theater holdings for a modest \$87,500 in cash, which also included the downtown Lyric and the Lyric Skydome, the latter called “America’s Most Beautiful Open-Air Motion Picture Palace.” All the theaters had first-run rights to films produced by Paramount Pictures. The Skourases were elated, and Rassieur wrote a contract on the spot. Spyros proudly heralded the “reopening” of the West End Lyric in September 1919 by flying a plane over the city and dropping thirty thousand passes to matinee showings, along with a handful of season passes and five passes to join him for a flyover of St. Louis. He even filmed the scenic overview to show in their movie houses.

But challenges quickly followed success. In late 1919 intense competition erupted among theater operators seeking to secure exclusive rights from the big studios to be the first in the region to show the latest hit films. When Paramount representative Sidney Kent tipped off the brothers that the studio’s film rental fees were about to increase, Spyros negotiated a generous deal with Paramount founder and head Adolph Zukor to split ownership of all Skouras theaters with the studio on a 50–50 basis, as long as they could continue to be the first St. Louis market to show Paramount films. But while waiting for Zukor to return the contract, Spyros heard the studio had struck a deal with the brothers’ biggest local theater competitors that included Harry Koplal, William Goldman, and Ben Cornwell. The deal would ultimately end the Skouras’ partnership with Paramount. Kent urged Spyros to again meet directly with Zukor.

With his first-run theater status at risk, in January 1920 Spyros met with Zukor on a train from New York to Chicago. The magnate insisted Skouras enter into a partnership with the Koplal group and Paramount, but Spyros declined, expressing his concern that as young men he



Adolph Zukor, movie studio pioneer and founder of Paramount Pictures, inscribes his name in concrete in front of Grauman’s Chinese Theater in Los Angeles in 1953. He is flanked by singer and actress Rosemary Clooney and Charles Skouras. Photograph courtesy of Michael G. Tschlis.

and his brothers would likely take the fall for any problems that might emerge. Skouras later recalled how Zukor “gave me hell” and “became very hostile and said I should accept his advice.” But Spyros stood his ground. He lost the Paramount deal, but as he predicted, within a year difficulties between the studio and the Koplal group led Zukor to sell back their interests and break with Koplal.

Meanwhile, the Skourases pursued a new strategy. To secure quality first-run films, the brothers approached Paramount’s biggest competitor, the First National Exhibitors’ Circuit. By 1920 the group was producing films under the First National Pictures brand and contracting with top stars like Mary Pickford, Buster Keaton, and Charlie Chaplin.

In February 1920 the Skourases sought to purchase the Central and the New Grand Central theaters as exclusive First National venues. The former was a small downtown house, and the latter was built in 1913 for \$180,000 as the largest movie theater in St. Louis. It seated two thousand people and boasted a fifteen-by-twenty-foot screen. The owners were William Sievers, who managed the New Grand Central, and Edmond Koeln, who also served as

St. Louis's city collector. The partners set their price for the two theaters and First National distribution rights at \$350,000—higher than they assumed the Skourases could afford. But they were wrong. Without the deal, the brothers would be relegated to second-run houses, an unacceptable option for Spyros. Again teaming with Leo Rassieur as a one-third investor, on March 27, 1920, the brothers formed the Skouras Brothers Company, soon renamed Skouras Brothers Enterprises. This time all their business partners were non-Greek, established St. Louis professionals.

The Skourases now operated nine major St. Louis movie venues: New Grand Central, Central, Pageant, Arsenal, Shaw, Lyric, and West End Lyric, as well as the Crystal Airdome and the Lyric Skydome. The brothers' first theater, the Olympia, was sold to John Karzin. The Skourases' success attracted wide attention. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* ran a story headlined "Two Former Busboys Own 9 Movie Theaters: Brothers Who Worked for \$1 a Day in 1914 Have Gross Income of \$775,000." Similar stories appeared across the nation touting the brothers as striking examples of "the rise of the immigrant." At ages thirty-one, twenty-seven, and twenty-four years, the Skourases' legendary Horatio Alger story was born. *The Moving Picture World* credited their success directly to Spyros, "a cool, reserved, and energetic young man" possessing "a genial disposition, a likeable and radiant personality and a seemingly unlimited will power. . . ."

In June 1920 the brothers took another big step by extending their reach to Kansas City and purchasing a theater there for \$250,000. Spyros leveraged the deal to obtain exclusive rights to First National film distribution in the entire state of Missouri and serve as franchise president. The Skourases now had first-person access to the studio's top management and talent. Important among them was Joseph Schenck, the producer managing the acting careers of his wife, Norma Talmadge, and her sister Constance.

Despite the accolades he received, the pressures Spyros endured from the business caused him to fall ill. His doctor speculated he might have lymphoma, and the young theater executive was sent to the Mayo Clinic, where Dr. Charles Mayo diagnosed him with a benign condition brought on by "over work." Taking a respite from his whirlwind schedule, on June 27, 1921, Spyros married a young woman he had met at Jones College, Sarah Briuglia, the daughter of an Italian immigrant

salooneer. He called her "Saroula," an affectionate Greek derivative similar to his mother's name. After the war Spyros had moved into a modest two-family flat with her parents on Etzel Avenue near the Pageant in University City. The couple wed in a Greek Orthodox service, and after a honeymoon to Niagara Falls they settled in an apartment near Washington University.

As their operations grew, the brothers hired Sydney J. Baker as their publicity director. Baker was formerly the merchandising director for the *St. Louis Star*, and his connections helped increase the amount of column space devoted to Skouras Theater exhibitions. Through publicized events—such as free movie screenings for children from St. Louis orphanages, or holding fundraisers for schools, hospitals, or the Community Chest—Spyros understood that engaging area charitable organizations was good for business.

When Charlie Chaplin debuted *The Kid* in February 1921, the highly anticipated First National comedy/drama he produced, directed, wrote, and starred in, the Skourases employed a unique publicity campaign. In the days running up to its exclusive St. Louis premiere at the West End Lyric and the Grand Central, the brothers hired six Chaplin imitators and six young boys portraying the title character to accompany them. The pairs were sent out on streets across the city heralding the premiere, attracting onlookers everywhere. The gimmick worked. The Skourases sold fifteen thousand seats on opening day, smashing all earlier records. "It was the best pulling card we ever had," Spyros told *The Motion Picture News*.

The brothers' success was watched closely by their chief competitors, Harry Koplal, Sam Hamburg, and Ben Cornwell of the City-Wide Amusement Company, now aligned with Famous Players-Lasky Studios, producers of Paramount films. In November 1921, the option was floated between the rivals that they would be better served by a merger. Leo Rassieur and Arthur Stickney of A. G. Edwards & Sons brokered the deal, leading to the creation of the St. Louis Amusement Company, with Spyros as president, Koplal as vice president, and Charles director of theater management. At its inception, the St. Louis Amusement Company owned fourteen theaters and several large airdomes valued at \$1.5 million, and there were plans to add more. Among those acquired was a newly built movie house that was the first to open in University City. Named the Tivoli, it seated fifteen hun-

dred people and was part of a larger four-story structure also housing shops at 6350 Delmar Boulevard.

FROM BUS BOYS TO PALACE BUILDERS

The brothers next turned their focus toward larger theaters. They invested heavily in the Grand Central, spending \$100,000 on a big electric sign, updated cooling system, new seating, and deluxe concert organ. While continuing to show nationally acclaimed films and paying record first-run fees for hits like Universal's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *The Phantom of the Opera*, the Skourases did not forget that they catered to a local audience. In October 1923 they paid a premium for exclusive first-run rights to *The Spirit of St. Louis*, a locally produced film depicting the history of the city meant to boost civic pride.

Operating a large theater like the Grand Central required the brothers to bill top-notch live performances. Their biggest rival, William Goldman, had been doing so for several years. He operated the city's major first-run Paramount house, the Missouri Theatre, just a block south on Grand. It was opened in November 1920 by Adolph Zukor himself, who before a crowd and Mayor Henry Kiel "presented" the theater to the citizens of St. Louis.

In addition to screening First National films, Charles began cutting his teeth overseeing stage productions. With help of the talented stage producer Larry Conley, the Grand Central featured sketches such as actors riding on Pullman cars with a scenic film backdrop creating the illusion of a moving train. Under the direction of David Silverman, the brothers also initiated a first in St. Louis movie exhibition by performing jazz riffs rather than standard classical music during movie screenings. Dancers were a favorite, and in *Domino Soldiers*, a line of chorus girls dressed as dominoes finished a routine by falling onto one another as the orchestra drummer tapped in sequence. Two sisters named Jane and Ginger Rogers were a popular song-and-dance duo. Ginger was especially renowned for her dance skills and mastery of the Charleston, talents that put her on a path for future movie roles alongside Fred Astaire.

To the surprise of many, the Skouras-Goldman rivalry came to a sudden halt in November 1925, when both sides agreed to a merger of their first-run houses that included the Grand Central and the Missouri theaters.



Exterior of the Missouri Theatre, 628 N. Grand Boulevard. The Grand Central Theater can be seen immediately to the north, with an advertisement for Show Boat. The St. Louis Theatre, now Powell Hall, is immediately north. Photograph by W. C. Persons, 1929. Missouri Historical Society Collections.

Goldman and Spyros had worked together on labor talks with striking theater musicians who for a time shut down musical performances at both houses. The mutual booking arrangement allowed the Skourases to now show first-run Paramount films. It also put management of the Missouri under Charles. But other factors were at play in the deal. After a big marketing buildup, another formidable competitor in the Grand entertainment district was set to open. Immediately north of the Grand Central, the new forty-two-hundred-seat, \$2 million St. Louis Theatre was a palatial showcase inside and out. It operated under the Orpheum theater circuit, long affiliated with quality vaudeville acts.

After the Goldman deal was reached, the brothers lost no time finding novel stage acts for the Missouri Theatre. Popular jazz music director Gene Rodemich and organist Stuart Barrie were moved from the Grand Central to the



The Missouri Rockets dance troupe. Photograph by O. C. Conkling, 1930s. Missouri Historical Society Collections.

Missouri, and the orchestra grew to thirty players. While in New York in 1922, Spyros witnessed a performance of *The Ziegfeld Follies*, a Broadway theatrical revue with precision dancing showgirls. He was so impressed that he hired their trainer, choreographer Russell Markert, to start a similar troupe at the Missouri. Markert recruited and trained a group of sixteen young St. Louis women, as well as a local child dancer named Betty Grable. The Missouri Rockets, as they came to be called, were a big hit. "The work was hard—three or four shows a day, seven days a week," dancer Ann Lorenzen remembered. "Each girl would work three weeks, then take a week off." The dancers were paid \$35 a week. "Not bad for those days," she recalled. (When the Great Depression hit, Markert took his "Rockets" dance concept to New York, where he started an enlarged chorus line of thirty-six dancers at

Radio City Music Hall and renamed them the Radio City Rockettes.) Variety shows at the Missouri ranged from jazz revues to a family-themed Circus Week, patriotic renditions, tropical beach dances, and fashion festivals.

The Missouri was put to multiple uses. As part of a group of investors in the city's first high-powered radio station, KMOX (1120 AM), the Skourases hosted the station's first live broadcasts from a makeshift studio at the theater. *The Skouras Brothers Sunday Night Club* became a regular feature on KMOX. To show they were good neighbors, Charles allowed the large Third Baptist Church next door free use of the auditorium for Sunday-morning Bible studies. To lure local sports enthusiasts, the Skourases showed exclusive film of the first World Series game between the St. Louis Cardinals and New York Yankees that had been played the day before at Yankee Stadium.

While his older brothers busied themselves with big studio negotiations and large-scale theater management, George found his own successful niche negotiating the Skourases' financial investment and long-term leases with smaller neighborhood houses: King Bee, Aubert (and its airdome), Chippewa, Powhattan, Congress, Virginia (and its airdome), Ozark, Ashland, Newstead, Webster Groves, and the Columbus Theater in the Hill neighborhood. He even started his own company for the purpose, called Columbia Amusement. Among George's arrangements with local houses was a 1 percent interest in the Hi-Pointe Theatre Company with his brothers' first partner, George Tompras, and members of his family. The Hi-Pointe and its adjacent airdome were at the city's western edge on McCausland Avenue. Such agreements assured the Skourases management influence and a margin of ticket sales. For the partners, a corporate tie to a Skouras lent financing clout. The very name was a bankable brand.

In November 1925, *The Motion Picture Daily* reported that the brothers had accomplished quite a feat. Through purchases, co-ownership, or long-term leases, they controlled or had substantial interest in twenty-eight operating theaters, in addition to three to be built, three that were closed, and eighteen airdomes. Their total holdings comprised 84,460 seats—42 percent of the St. Louis market and most of its large first-run theaters. No other major American city could claim a company with such a high market percentage. A later deal struck with the Publix Theatres chain extended their theater holdings to Indianapolis.

But there was more to be done. As rivals began building palaces, the brothers planned to erect their own, one embodying their achievements and exceeding the competition in grandeur. Its location would be the corner of Locust and Seventh streets, a site Spyros had passed many times twelve years earlier on his way to tending bar. They named the future palace the Ambassador and hired renowned Chicago theater architects Rapp and Rapp to design it, the same firm that created the lavish St. Louis Theater. With total costs for the project at \$5.5 million, Skouras Brothers Enterprises held a public stock offering in April 1925, with eighty thousand shares valued at \$36 each. The price took off, and shares rose up to \$60. However, the brothers still had to take on a great deal of debt, which only increased when excavators hit sand.

The Ambassador opened its doors to the public with great pomp on August 26, 1926. The seventeen-story building with its two soaring vertical corner signs topping a triple marquee signaled to patrons that they were entering something magnificent. As long lines filed down the street, Air Service flyers from Scott Field buzzed the skies, blimps floated overhead, and an escape artist named Raffles performed bound and dangling by ropes and chains from the top of the building. The theater took up the building's first six stories, immediately below the brothers' seventh-floor offices.

Patrons entered an exquisitely detailed Spanish Renaissance marble lobby rising forty feet, described by the *Post-Dispatch* as "decoration . . . heaped upon decoration and tint inlaid among tints until the eye turned for relief from sculpture, panel, and molding to the silver pools of the 'hanging ceiling,' the largest of them a lake of restless sheen." Floor to ceiling was trimmed in brilliant



Exterior of the Ambassador Theater, at the northwest corner of Seventh and Locust streets. Photograph by W. C. Persons, 1935. Missouri Historical Society Collections.



Interior of the Ambassador Theater. Photograph by W. C. Persons, ca. 1925. Missouri Historical Society Collections.

hues of “buff, a light green gold and a striking shade of red.” In the great marble lobby stood a golden statue of city namesake King Louis IX of France flanked by gold-draped maidens, a clear nod to civic pride. The theater’s \$115,000 Wurlitzer organ was custom designed by Stuart Barrie. It featured four keyboards with ninety-three keys, and pipes ranging from a quarter inch to six feet in diameter and thirty-two feet high.

Former mayor Henry Kiel, whose firm was the general contractor, took the stage and led a group of dignitaries in their praise of the Skourases, while congratulatory cables came in from Hollywood celebrities. The brothers never appeared on stage even to take a bow but instead worked the floor to ensure everything was running smoothly. “It was orderliness personified,” reported *The Motion Picture News*. Skouras service had reached a new level.

To announce the Ambassador’s daily bill, the Skourases hired a thirty-two-year-old vaudevillian comic and singer named Eddie Lowery. With piercing eyes and a wide smile, each day Lowery introduced a string of performers. One of Lowery’s most popular acts was to imitate the three Skouras brothers, replete with Greek accents, in a back-and-forth disagreement over how a stage show should be run. Adoring fans lined up outside the theater as early as 9:00 a.m. for the day’s first show. Between the Grand Central, the Missouri, and the Ambassador, the brothers had a near lock on live St. Louis entertainment.

Even as the brothers’ new palace and stage shows drew national acclaim, as director and trustee of First National Pictures, Spyros worked feverishly to head off encroaching competitors. Chief among them was William Fox of Fox Pictures, who was constructing his

own luxurious first-run palace across the street from the Grand Central and the Missouri. In 1928 squabbles erupted within First National when, against Spyros's advice, Boston financier Joseph Kennedy was hired to run studio production. Prioritizing cost-cutting over creative standards, film quality plummeted. Spyros saw disaster looming and spearheaded Kennedy's ouster. He and other company directors spent hours in New York negotiating a contract over production control they knew Kennedy wouldn't accept. The father of future president John F. Kennedy tore up the contract and walked out in disgust.

Seeking a better studio partnership for the brothers' St. Louis theaters, Spyros met with Harry Warner of Warner Bros. Pictures to negotiate a merger with First National. Early on, Warner had envisioned movies incorporating sound and had released the first successful "talkie," *The Jazz Singer*, produced by a young scriptwriter named Darryl F. Zanuck. It had its exclusive St. Louis premiere at the Grand Central. After three months of intense negotiations, in October 1928 Warner purchased all of First National's stock. As part of the buyout Spyros took over Warner's nationwide theater operations, which required he move to the company's management headquarters in New York. In January 1929, Spyros Skouras left St. Louis for the city that had greeted him to America nearly twenty years earlier—but now as a wealthy man and major studio executive. George went along to assist him. Meanwhile, Charles stayed in St. Louis managing the Skourases' former theaters, now under the Warner Bros. banner.

Transfer of their regional theater empire to Warner placed the brothers in a sound financial position, as they took a large cash buyout that also paid executive-level salaries. But they heeded advice to invest their entire payout in equities, and in terrible timing lost nearly everything in the stock market crash of 1929. The Great Depression took a tremendous toll on theater exhibition and live performances.

With their former St. Louis theater businesses placed in financial receivership in order to pay back losses to stockholders, in 1932 Charles left St. Louis to regroup with his brothers. After a two-decade ride from poverty to meteoric growth and sudden loss, the Skourases left St. Louis behind. The one asset they retained was ownership of the Ambassador Theatre.

AN EPIC SEQUEL

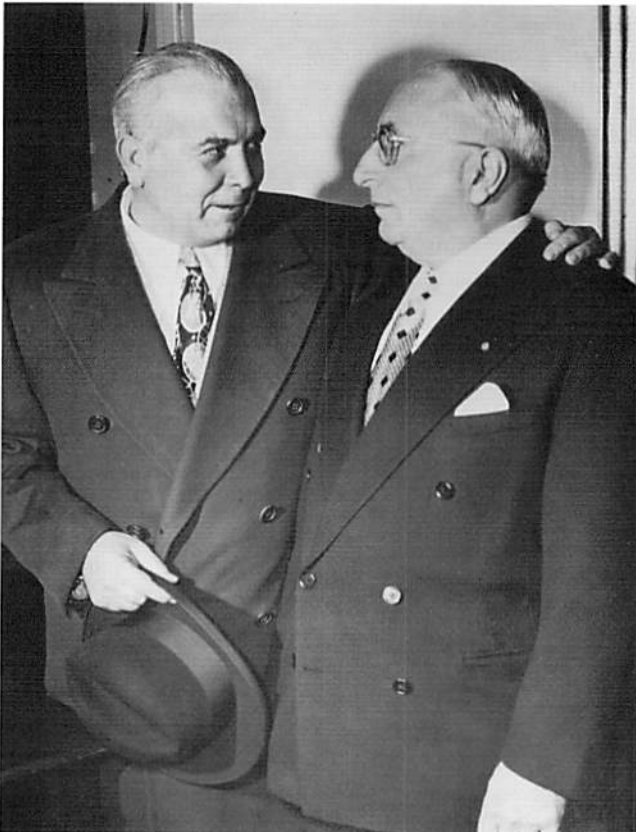
The brothers soon grew frustrated working for the Warners, who they felt acted in bad faith after the merger by "playing games with the stock arrangements" that didn't fare well with First National shareholders. Although the brothers had far less money in the bank, with their proven experience as executives and showmen and their top industry contacts intact, once more the Skourases charted a new career path. With the help of their friend Sidney Kent, now general manager at Paramount, they left Warner Bros. in 1931 to briefly assist with Paramount operations. In 1932 Kent became president of the struggling Fox Film Company, and Spyros and Charles helped him turn around Fox's financially troubled theaters under a subsidiary called Wesco. Meanwhile, George remained in New York, developing a new chain of Skouras theaters there.

Despite stabilizing its exhibition venues, Fox's production studio was faltering. In his memoirs, Spyros proudly noted that in 1935 he facilitated a merger between Fox and 20th Century Pictures, a company headed by his old friend and veteran executive Joseph Schenk and dynamic film producer Darryl Zanuck. Kent went on to become president of the new 20th Century Fox Film Company. When Kent died in March 1942, discussion about a replacement turned to Spyros, who was the preferred choice of Darryl Zanuck and 20th Century Fox employees. For the next twenty years Skouras, working closely with Zanuck, authorized the production of nearly eight hundred 20th Century Fox films, including acclaimed classics *Gentleman's Agreement*, *Twelve O'Clock High*, *Three Coins in the Fountain*, *The Seven Year Itch*, *The King and I*, *The Three Faces of Eve*, and *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

During a time of increasing screen competition from television, Skouras successfully spearheaded the introduction of CinemaScope, a novel widescreen color movie technology. The first movie released in the format was Fox's 1953 biblical film *The Robe*, a box-office success starring Richard Burton. Soon other film studios adopted similar technologies. Spyros's influence was extensive, with one studio historian claiming that during his tenure as CEO, 20th Century Fox's "product and policies reflected the personality of Spyros Panagiotis Skouras."

Meanwhile, Charles managed the 650-theater Fox West Coast and National Theaters chain, which stretched from Los Angeles to Kansas City. In 1946 he was the highest paid man in America at \$985,300. (Betty Grable was the highest paid woman at \$299,300.) Although the overwhelming majority of his income went to pay taxes, Charles had no issue with it, expressing only appreciation for America: "I found economic hardship coupled with spiritual exultation in the principles of freedom each man considered his own." He died of a heart attack in 1954 at sixty-five.

George, an important but always a background player in the brothers' success, continued to build a Skouras theater chain in New York. In 1953 he co-founded Magna Pictures with producers Joseph Schenck and Michael Todd to distribute films like *Oklahoma!* in the widescreen format known as Todd-AO. He later served as president



Spyros Skouras (left), president of 20th Century Fox, with Louis B. Mayer, co-founder of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios, at a studio executive conference in New York in November 1947. Photograph courtesy of Michael G. Tsichlis.

of United Artists studios and served as its board chair. He died in March 1964 at the age of sixty-eight.

Spyros's tenure as head of 20th Century Fox ended in August 1962, in the wake of publicized cost overruns filming *Cleopatra*. Although he remained on as chairman of the board at Fox until 1969, his active years in the industry were behind him. One of the studio's last films he authorized was based on a play about a musical family. Sensing a hit, Spyros spent \$1.5 million for its production rights. Released in March 1965, *The Sound of Music* was one of Fox's greatest artistic and financial successes, earning five Academy Awards. While head of Fox, Spyros also hired and cultivated talent such as Gregory Peck and Marilyn Monroe. In October 2017, after numerous reports of forced sexual encounters by contemporary movie studio and television figures, Joan Collins accused Spyros (without specifically naming him) of propositioning her for the lead role in *Cleopatra* fifty-eight years earlier. While not refuting Collins's claims, a scholar who published Spyros's memoirs and extensively researched his correspondence asserts that Collins was only considered for the role when the film was slated for B-movie status but was dropped when it was decided that *Cleopatra* would be produced as a high-end epic. The role instead went to A-lister Elizabeth Taylor.

As he did while in St. Louis, Spyros Skouras engaged in many philanthropic and civic causes, most notably spearheading aid efforts for civilians dying from starvation in Nazi-occupied Greece. He endured personal tragedy as well. Just two years after Fox released *The Snake Pit*, a milestone film about mental illness and institutionalization, Spyros's twenty-four-year-old daughter, Dionysia, who had been institutionalized a year earlier, committed suicide by jumping off the four-story Fox West Coast building.

The Skourases made occasional return trips to St. Louis to visit friends and family, including a niece named Costula whom they had helped bring to St. Louis in 1914. She married George Caporal, another local Greek movie theater owner. During his final visit to St. Louis in October 1968 to speak at a fundraiser before the St. Louis Children's Variety Clubs, Spyros didn't forget his roots. Calling St. Louis his "native city" and recounting his early successes that began there and culminated in control of over forty-five theaters, hiring 550 musicians in addition to hundreds of other employees, and showcasing

memorable acts and performers that went on to national renown. Spyros Skouras died of a heart attack at his home in Rye, New York, on August 16, 1971.

It's been more than a century since the Skouras brothers launched their careers as movie magnates from a nickelodeon at the site of what now is the entrance to the Stifel Theatre. As with the Olympia, few other Skouras-affiliated St. Louis theaters survived decades of urban decay and theater industry change. The Pageant closed in August 1966 after a final screening of *The Agony and the Ecstasy*. It briefly operated as an R&B concert venue but was torn down in 1975. Its name lives on in the Pageant Theatre, which opened in 2000 as a concert venue three blocks west of the old site on Delmar Boulevard. The Skourases' flagship theaters are also gone. Both the Grand Central and the Missouri were razed for parking lots, the former in 1949 and the latter in 1959. Their crown jewel, the Ambassador, which continued under family ownership after the brothers' deaths, was plagued with high office vacancies and competition from entertainment destinations in the suburbs. During the mid-1970s the shimmering theater served as a concert hall for rock and pop performers including Jefferson Starship, Steely Dan, James Taylor, and Jim Stafford. Despite attempts by cultural and architectural preservationists to save it, the great palace was razed in 1996. Today it's the site of U.S. Bank Plaza.

Two Skouras-related theaters are still showing films today. Now a three-screen venue, the Tivoli Theatre endures as an essential part of the popular, eclectic Loop district in University City. The second is the Hi-Pointe Theatre, owned by family members of Tommy James, who once operated St. Louis's first movie house, the World's Dream, and went on to operate many others. Tommy James and Spyros Skouras remained in lifelong contact after Spyros left St. Louis. It was reported that when James experienced a time of financial distress in the theater business, Spyros telegraphed his fellow countryman with a short statement of encouragement: "No mariner ever distinguished himself on a smooth sea." ■

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